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Resistance in the Quotidian Life: With Special Attention to Daily Life in Schools

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Abstract

Our images of social change err on the side of organized, collective and public actions and, as such, it is easy to miss the power of everyday resistance to support social change and class struggle. This paper describes everyday resistance, with examples of everyday resistance in the lived experience of schools. Although everyday resistance is individual, local and small, through accumulation and narrative storytelling these acts not only impact the quotidian life, but potentially larger social change and class struggle.[1]

Introduction

When we think of actions for social change we are drawn first to organized, collective, public actions. We think of demonstrations, riots, revolutionary uprisings. We think of petitions, strikes, boycotts, and class action law suits. These actions are often recorded as ruptures or turning points in history.

Many of these actions create evocative images of how collective action challenges power. We think of the lone man standing in front of the tank in Tiananmen Square. We think of the Yellow Jackets descending upon Paris, disrupting the City through marches, violence, and graffiti to compel the French government to pause and back down on repressive policies. We think of the throngs of protestors taking to the streets in Hong Kong, week after week. We think of climate change rallies led by children and youth. We must, of course, acknowledge the importance and potential effectiveness of such highly visible, collective actions in service of social change.

However, in this paper, I want to talk about quieter, often individual, more local actions inherent in everyday lived experience that also matter in the disruption and redistribution of power. These actions are sometimes called 'everyday resistance,' a term coined by James Scott (1985) in *Weapons of the Weak*, a study of peasant rebellions in Malaysia. Scott (1989) suggests, "events to which the state, the ruling classes, and the intelligentsia accord most attention" are what become defined as resistance, and as a consequence "by paying attention to formal organization and public demonstrations, [historians] have missed most acts of resistance throughout history" (Scott, 2018, p. 49). Collective and everyday forms of resistance are complementary; both are necessary in political and class struggle. Indeed, one may lead to the other.

This idea of everyday resistance is also at the heart of Vaclav Havel's manifest for dissent, *The Power of the Powerless*, published at the same time as Charter 77, the grassroots human rights petition criticizing the Czech government for its failure to protect human rights. Havel's essay

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[1] An earlier version of this paper was presented at the IX International Conference on Critical Education in Naples, Italy, July 2019.

focuses on how to resist a totalitarian regime. He saw the undercurrent of the Czechoslovakian Velvet Revolution as individual acts of courage, what he describes as overcoming fears that lead people to "live within a lie." Living within a lie is exemplified by Havel's green grocer example—the green grocer displays the sign "Workers of the World, Unite!" in his window not as a commitment to the regime but out of fear, and so symbolically participates in his own oppression and humiliation. This notion of living within a lie is key to understanding how we participate sometimes unwittingly in the hegemonic narrative of capitalism, indeed the hegemonic narrative of any social relationship where power is differentially distributed. The alternative to living in a lie is to live in the truth, or "personal non-participation in lies" as Solzhenitsyn (1974) enjoins us in a call for moral courage when we feel powerless. One means to living not by lies is everyday resistance.

What I want to do in this discussion is connect the idea of everyday resistance to power, explicate what everyday resistance is, and show how mundane acts in the quotidian, with illustrations from schooling, have the potential to be revolutionary and embody the potential for social change.

Power & Resistance

Resistance must be understood as a necessary component of power. If we think of power as structural, as embodied within the State or bureaucracies, and existing prior to resistance, then resistance becomes an external response to alter pre-existing social structures. This view of power is what Lukes (2004) calls one-dimensional power focusing on decision making in the political process or two-dimensional power that recognizes conflict in power but emphasizes control of the agenda by a few. These views of power give precedence to organized, collective forms of resistance that noticeably disrupt or alter social structures. In this view, we are likely to dismiss everyday resistance as trivial acts that at best provide temporary relief to individuals, but have little sociological import. But Lukes continues to describe a conception of power that emphasizes "socially structured and culturally patterned behavior of groups and practices of institutions" (p. 22) which opens the discourse to Gramsci's notion of hegemony. Power, Gramsci said, was exercised less often by coercion and more often by the use of intellect and morality to shape the consensus of the masses. This third conception is of power that is diffuse, often 'invisible' and dominates social class relations through promoting certain values and beliefs and masking contradictions so as to maintain the class struggle, the essence of Engel's false consciousness.

Following from Gramsci's more indirect characterization of power we can see power does not reside anywhere and it cannot be possessed. Rather, it is an outcome of ongoing transactional relations between the more powerful and the less powerful, and we can then see the inherent possibility for resistance in mundane, everyday actions. Gramsci wrote of counter-hegemonic struggle which we can see enacted in strategies like liberation theology, Freirean pedagogy, and participatory action research, but which we can imagine at a more micro level, the level of the individual. Counter-hegemonic stories are also possible. Havel contended, people always have "*within themselves* the power to remedy their own powerlessness." People are never truly powerless.

Power, in this transactional view, is a 'probabilistic social relationship' and contingent on the participation of both the more and less powerful. Participation of the less powerful may be expressed in many ways including complacency, sanguinity, organized resistance, or everyday resistance. Foucault (1980) emphasizes power as a strategy rather than an object or possession:

"Power must be analyzed as something which circulates; or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localized here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised in a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in a position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always the elements of its articulation" (p. 98). This fluid conception of power creates the possibility for resistance deployed by the less powerful to thwart the exercise of power through class, institution or state that is inevitably reflected in a quotidian life.

Everyday Resistance

Scott (1989) defines everyday resistance thus:

> The Brechtian or Schweikian forms of resistance I have in mind are an integral part of the small arsenal of relatively powerless groups. They include such acts as foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, feigned ignorance, desertion, pilfering, smuggling, poaching, arson, slander, sabotage, surreptitious assault and murder, anonymous threats, and so on. These techniques, for the most part quite prosaic, are the ordinary means of class struggle. They are the techniques of "first resort" in those common historical circumstances where open defiance is impossible or entails mortal danger. When they are practiced widely by members of an entire class against elites or the state, they may have aggregate consequences out of all proportion to their banality when considered singly. No adequate account of class relations is possible without assessing their importance. That they have been absent or marginal to most accounts of class relations is all too understandable. The purpose of many such techniques, after all, is to avoid notice and detection. (p. 34)

Scott (1985, p. 33) contrasts everyday resistance with formal, collective resistance: the former is prosaic, covert, fragmented, immediate, and informal while the latter is planned, public, organized, collective and long-term. Everyday resistance is conscious (of being less powerful in a power relationship) and it is purposeful (meant to disrupt that power relationship). For example, squatting requires the squatter knows the property is owned by someone else and they have reason to believe they have a claim or right to the property, or perhaps simply the right to housing. But, not every petty theft can or should be considered an act of resistance—sometimes it is just stealing.

While everyday resistance may be driven by principles (like social justice or feminism or environmentalism) it need not be, and indeed may be an expression of or attempt to maintain human dignity. The resistance may be about self-preservation, perhaps even one's survival. Key is that this resistance is intentional and not accidental, it is manifest in an individual representation but within a broader cultural context in which everyday resistance occurs. Numerous studies focus on the everyday forms of resistance in institutional contexts like mental hospitals, prisons, schools, bureaucracies and courtrooms. A wave of recent research focuses on resistance in refugee camps [see, for example, Olivius (2017) and Roy (2018)] and that of Palestinians under Israeli occupation.

For example, the Palestinian practice of *sumūd*, understood as steadfastness or perseverance, is apparent especially among women who refuse to leave their land and instead act as if life were normal [see, for example, Richter-Devroe (2011) and Ryan (2015)]. The home becomes a place of safety and resistance by maintaining a sense of normalcy in the face of a situation anything but normal. This resistance includes: "upholding cultural traditions such as

weddings and holidays; maintaining a sense of normalcy; engaging in micro-enterprises; sharing songs and folklore despite threats to personal safety and surveillance; and documenting the Palestinian struggle through writing, protest art and graffiti;" replanting uprooted trees; and staying on demolished homes claiming the space as home. *Sumūd* then is an individual act, although collectively understood and practiced, meant to preserve a sense of self in the present oppressive situation looking toward a future of great self-determination and liberty.

Everyday acts of resistance are individual; however, resisters often rely on the complicit silence of others and so are always in some way shared. This implies a common sense of shared rights and shared oppression, even if not everyone resists or does so simultaneously. And, everyday acts of resistance are collectively shared knowledge, as illustrated by the concept of samūd.

Organized collective resistance relies on strategy, everyday resistance on tactics. There are common tactics (such as pilfering, strategic compliance, and mockery), but everyday resistance is contextual and the tactics used are constitutive of the lived experience of power relations, embedded in the quotidian life, and reflect the creativity and imagination of the less powerful. Tactics derive from perceived cracks and vulnerability within a particular context, and so there will be many forms of everyday resistance devised to thwart power and appropriation. "What gives these techniques a certain unity is that they are invariably quiet, disguised, anonymous, often undeclared forms of resisting claims imposed by claimants who have superior access to force and to public power" (Scott, 1989, p. 37).

Tactics are relatively safe (often because of the small scale nature of the resistance), often ambiguous (so as to enable deniability), provide some clear sense of gain (often material, but also emotional or social), and require no or relatively little collaboration or coordination.

A couple of examples of seemingly little import illustrate tactics, the first an act of non-compliance and the second literal responses.

Example 1: The Right to Bare Arms[2]

> Recently, women working in the British Columbia provincial legislative building were told by the legislature's sergeant-at-arms to cover their arms in the hallways of the capital. The Speaker of the House asserted the legislature dress code calls for "gender-neutral business attire," generally consisting of layered clothing that includes covered shoulders for both men and women.
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> The following day, many women came to work bare armed, individual choices made by workers challenging the restrictive dress code, forcing a change in that dress code, and winning 'the right to bare arms.'

[2] These events were described in a local newspaper article. Dress code: Women working at BC Legislature win right to bare arms. https://vancouversun.com/news/local-news/dress-code-women-working-at-b-c-legislature-win-right-to-bare-arms, April 1, 2019.

Example 2: Amelia Bedelia's literal interpretations[3]

> Peggy Parish's book series about a young woman, Amelia Bedelia, often highlights women's domestic labour and Amelia demonstrates resistance through literally doing what she is asked. In a sequence from *Come Back, Amelia Bedelia* she literally serves a cup of coffee with cereal mixed in after her employer Mrs. Rogers asks for cereal with her coffee.
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> Amelia Bedelia's resistance may seem amusing, but it is no less a commentary and self-dignifying act of resistance than when Jessie Jackson as a young man working as a restaurant server (before fame as a civil rights leader) would spit in the food he served to white people.[4]

Everyday Resistance in School Life

In education we might be most interested in schools as contexts for everyday resistance. Schools are complex contexts of power relations, usually hierarchically structured with students at the bottom (or maybe it is support workers, like janitors and maintenance workers, who are at the bottom), teachers in the middle, then administrators. But, there are also policy makers outside of the school, parents, politicians, and other community players. In addition to these complex relations, schools are driven by a hegemonic narrative that says 'we are all on the same side' and 'children come first,' and thus power differentials are often masked and draw people relatively easily to 'live within a lie.' While these narratives are powerful deterrents to resistance, schools are nonetheless sites of daily resistance by many.

Teachers resist, for example, by deviating from the official curriculum; hoarding supplies and materials; sending subversive messages to students and parents; working to rule. In an ethnographic study of the impact of government testing on teachers and students, teachers were told they could not pull students out of class for special individual reading instruction (Mathison & Freeman, 2003). Teachers had invested considerable time in preparing curricular materials and were pedagogically committed to the idea of individualized instruction. They went against the policy by teaching students in broom closets where they were unlikely to be detected by administrators.

Students resist, for example, by expending the minimum amount of effort; being argumentative; playing with dress codes; responding to teachers with silence or mumbling; avoiding 'diversions' that get in the way of academic success; sleeping in class. Students may even resist by rejecting school—dropping out or seeking alternative forms of education. There are a number of critical ethnographic studies that illustrate students' everyday resistance. One of the best is Paul Willis' *Learning to Labour*, in which he describes student resistance as a meaningful

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[3] Beginning in 1963, Peggy Parish wrote a dozen chapter books with Amelia Bedelia as the central character. There were many more Amelia Bedelia books subsequently written by other authors and the later books did not always retain Amelia's resistance to authority whilst preserving the comicalness of her literalness.

[4] Jesse Jackson's resistance to authority and specifically the reference to spitting in restaurant goers food was part of a New York Times story about his rise to prominence as an African American preacher and champion of civil and social rights. https://www.nytimes.com/1972/07/09/archives/jesse-jackson-i-am-audience-i-am-jesse-somebody-audience-somebody.html July 9, 1972

political act to subvert the hidden implications of schooling. Willis (1977) illustrates how working class boys develop a counter school culture embodied in what they do, say, and believe to resist the disciplining of the school system that tracks them as if they are naturally less capable.

And other less powerful actors will also resist; perhaps the janitor steals time by watching movies on his phone, as does the secretary who does online shopping during work, or the administrative assistant who fudges his over time to compensate for what he considers inadequate pay, or the principal who augments her work benefits by registering for conferences that are really an opportunity for a vacation.

Revolutionary Possibility of the Mundane

Two primary ways that mundane everyday acts of resistance have the potential to create change far in excess of what might be expected are: 1) when there is a significant accumulation of these acts such that real consequences ensue, and 2) the everyday narration of everyday acts of resistance creates shared knowledge about tactics, thus spreading their use and possible consequences across times and places.

Accumulation of Everyday Resistance

Individual acts of resistance are mundane, part of life as lived when taken individually, but if they are practiced widely by entire classes against a powerful elite or the state they have the potential for cumulative consequences. "[J]ust as millions of anthozoan polyps create, willy-nilly, a coral reef, thousands upon thousands of petty acts of insubordination and evasion create a political and economic barrier reef of their own. And whenever, to pursue the simile, the ship of state runs aground on such a reef, attention is typically directed to the shipwreck itself and not the vast aggregation of actions which make it possible" (Scott, 1985, p. 36)

Scott uses the example of military desertions to illustrate the cumulative impact of everyday resistance. Desertion is contrasted with mutiny, the former being an individual everyday act of resistance and the latter being an organized collective action to gain control of military force. Scott points to desertions from the Confederate Army during the US civil war as key to the Confederacy's collapse, and the desertions from the Czarist army contributing to the 1917 Bolshevik victory. In neither case were the desertions part of an organized rebellion, but their cumulative impact was as momentous as open acts of sedition might have been.

A contemporary educational example of this cumulative consequence has occurred in Canada, in British Columbia. Teachers' and parents' everyday resistance to standardized testing has over time changed the ways this information can be used. This resistance stems from a right wing think tank's use of the data to rank all schools in the province, a thinly disguised attack on public schools and the promotion of a narrative favoring privatization of schooling.

The individual acts of teachers[5] encouraging parents to opt their children out of the 4th and 7th grade standardized government tests, along with the individual acts of parents and children who opted out, have, over a period of a few years, so disrupted the available data (in some instances

[5] While this started as a grassroots movement, it has become a tactic supported by the province-wide teacher union and the school trustees association has petitioned the government to rethink public sharing of the data, which is what permits the pro-privatization faction to rank schools in hopes of illustrating that private schools are better than public schools.

whole schools do not participate in the testing; in many others there is great irregularity in the data) that any rankings are suspect. While this right wing think tank continues to report rankings, the public and even right wing journalists know they are compromised and suspect the data are of little value.

With the accumulation of these individual acts of resistance, the province-wide teacher union now carries the mantle of this resistance, providing cover for individual teachers, communicating directly with parents about how to opt their children out of the testing, and rejecting the provincial mandate in public contexts such as the media.[6]

Narratives of Everyday Resistance

Everyday acts of resistance often serve to advantage the individual materially (stealing food, for example, and this is especially so when people live a life that is close to the margins of survival). At a symbolic level, these acts may also maintain or restore individuals' desire for fairness or maintain a fundamental sense of human dignity and decency.

Although everyday resistance may be individual acts, they are not isolated and are understood collectively. The acts of resistance become part of a narrative of the less powerful, shared and reinforced at a collective level. Indeed, these narratives of everyday resistance often challenge other narratives (such as narratives of vulnerability, incompetence, ignorance) meant to reinforce asymmetrical power relationships. These narratives create an understanding and a practice of everyday life and may even be the groundwork for more organized political action. Storytelling collectivizes and disseminates what is otherwise understood as only an individual act or experience.

A study of everyday resistance to legal authority in the US by sociologists Ewick and Silbey (2003) illustrates how individual acts are extended in time and space transcending the personal, even if not necessarily altering power relations. It is in telling stories "to oppose and resist legal authority, [that] interviewees transformed a momentary transaction into a historical event, recorded not only in their own memory but reconstructed for an audience" (p. 1338). The story "extends temporally and socially what might otherwise be an individual, discrete, and ephemeral transaction" (p. 1328).

Social media is a place that teachers share experiences and strategies and begin to create narratives of resistance in collaboration with colleagues they may never know personally or see face-to-face. The overwhelmingly popular closed Facebook group, Badass Teachers (BATS)[7], illustrates teacher sharing of experiences of oppression and tactical responses to that oppression. Stories posted often define the oppression and the comments share how teachers can and might respond. The Badass Teachers are not, however, a singular voice and do not respond to every authoritarian act in a common way. The comments are in effect individual stories that others can

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[6] This September 25, 2019 news story illustrates this shift, the accumulation of everyday resistance having an perceptible impact and then being adopted as a collective strategy: *BCTF says parents can opt out of FSA, despite school boards saying it's mandatory*. https://globalnews.ca/news/5952017/fsa-testing-fight-bc/

[7] Badass Teachers Association (BATs) was created in 2013 and is manifest primarily in its closed Facebook page. There are 64K+ members, mostly from the USA and a small number from other countries. The group is a pro-public education and pro-union and often focuses on issues of anti-privatization, anti-testing, and unionism with racial and social justice work. While this FB group illustrates how narrative creates shared tactics and responses to oppressive conditions, the group also serves other purposes, such as sharing curriculum resources. https://www.facebook.com/groups/BadAssTeachers/

tap into to develop an understanding of their own experiences and potential responses available to them.

In one Canadian province, another Facebook group plays a similar role to BATS. Figure 1 illustrates how these narratives might begin and then develop through the discussion in the comments. At the time of these posts, teachers were about to begin the school year without a contract within a highly politicized context. This figure illustrates one teacher's work to rule plan, essentially to reject working for no pay during the pre-school year time when many teachers organize their classrooms prior to the students' arrival. The narrative isn't singular and this figure includes only a few comments to show how the idea of working to rule by not coming to work before the first day of school builds. Other comments are cautionary, essentially concerned with the harm to students. For this reason, some teachers reject the strategy and privilege students as illustrated by this comment: "Meh. I went in. I can't punish the kids for government idiocy." An illustration of what Havel called "living in a lie."

The narrative shows a strategy (work to rule) and the discussion begins to build justifications for it, but this narrative also becomes instructive to participants thus strengthening the justification and perhaps the likelihood of more teachers taking up the work to rule strategy. In Figure 2, the work to rule strategy is fortified by the realization that teachers are not insured if they are not "working."

Figure 1. Facebook post illustrating building a narrative of resistance through work to rule strategies.

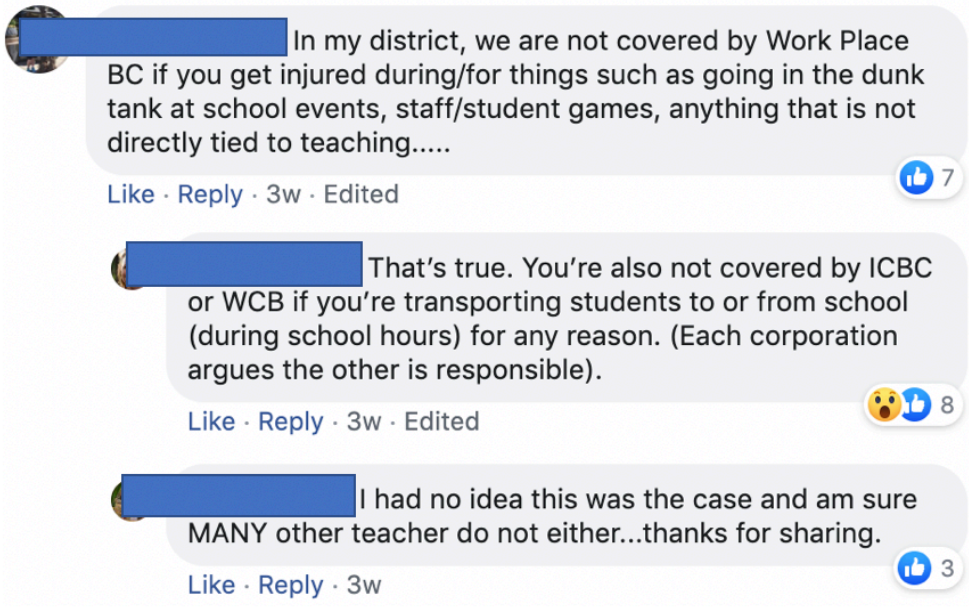

Figure 2. Facebook post illustrating the development of justifications in the narrative of work to rule.

Figure 3 illustrates the building of a narrative about teachers spending their own money to provide learning materials not funded by the district/government. The resistance strategies, in this case, are developed through the discussion rather than being offered by the initial post. This narrative demonstrates more push back than the previous example as teachers see the lack of materials as directly harmful to students and requiring untenable pedagogical compromises on their part. This tension is reflected in the short term versus long term effects of either spending your own money or not. Also, the narrative is enriched by the addition of new strategies if teachers feel compelled to spend their own money, specifically how to communicate to parents what the funding shortfalls look like in their children's classrooms, either through before and after photographs or lists of materials that would be available if there were adequate funding.

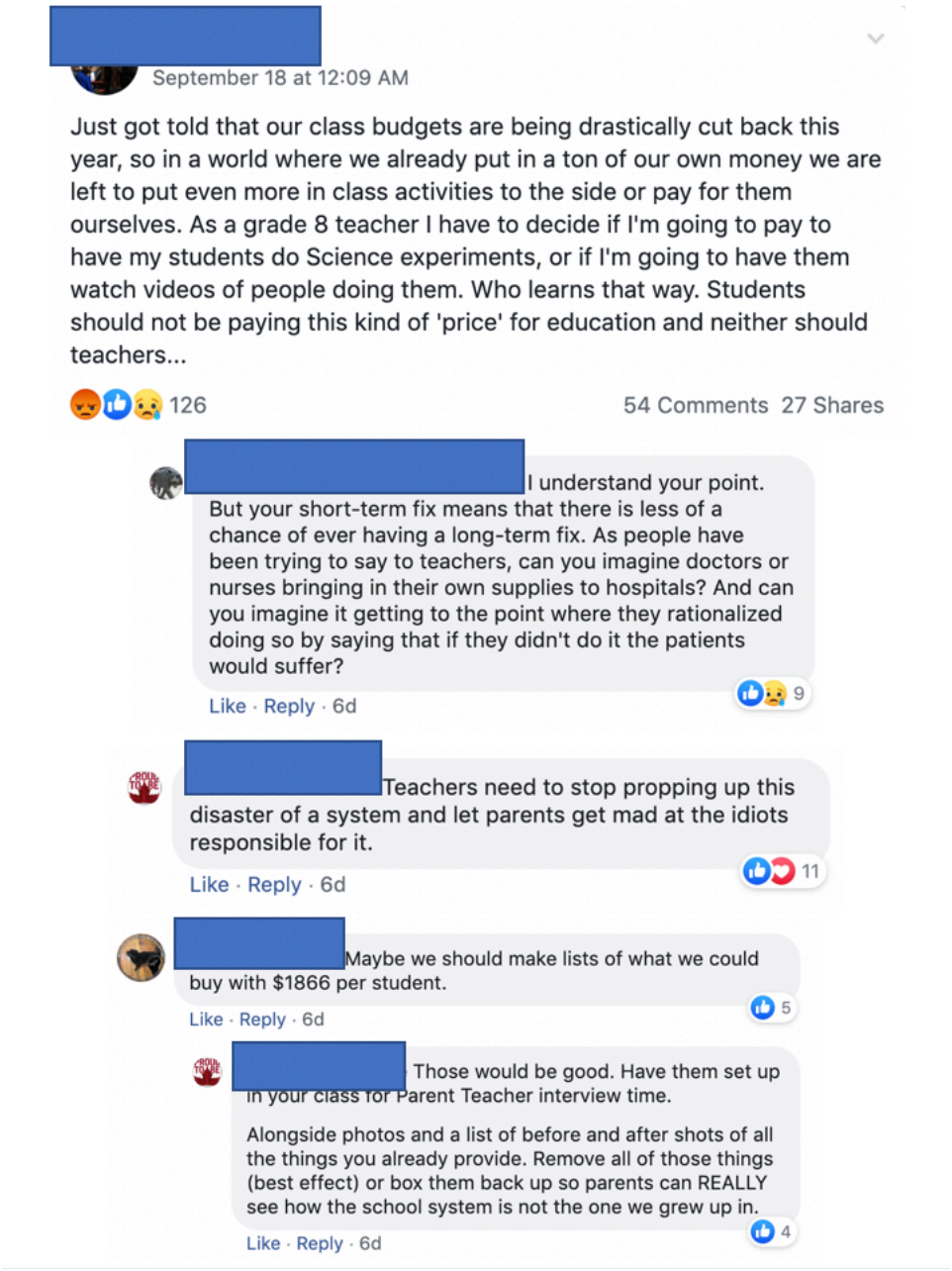

Figure 3. Facebook post illustrating sharing strategies to show how much of their own money teachers spend on classroom and learning materials.

In these examples, stories are ones where the less powerful become the protagonists in the face of more powerful legal or bureaucratic authority, and the stories reveal very specific ways power can be reversed or disrupted, albeit often temporarily. When individuals tell stories of their everyday resistance they build a shared understanding of power structure and where the cracks in that structure can be exploited. When these everyday forms of resistance are shared through stories, they become shared knowledge, transcending the specific context and suggesting consequential ways of acting in the face of power.

Conclusion

I conclude by repeating myself: organized, collective resistance and everyday resistance are complementary, both are necessary in political and class struggle. One may lead to the other. But the importance and power of everyday acts of resistance warrant further analysis and serious consideration as components of class struggle and social change. Everyday acts of resistance are in essence a practical theory of social action in the quotidian life.

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